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ABSTRACT

Research has found that elderly widows are alienated, disengaged, and depressed. However, there is little consensus across theories as to the inter-relationship of these variables. The social interactionist theory that disengagement leads to chronic depression and alienation was tested for a group of widows (N=32) and married women (N=28) over the age of 50 who lived in a small town. Subjects completed Zung's Self-Rating Depression Scale, a measure of alienation, and a behavioral checklist of frequency and nature of social contacts. Results indicated that marital status had a significant effect on alienation and depression. Widows were significantly more alienated and depressed than married women. Marital status did not have a significant effect on any of the social interaction categories. Widowhood correlated with alienation and depression, but not with disengagement. Disengagement was not an antecedent to alienation and depresison. Further research into the subjective and objective elements of disengagement is needed to arrive at a more cogent model of widowhood. (Author/NRB)

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ALIENTATION AND DEPRESSION IN THE SMALL TOWN WIDOW

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It is well established that elderly widows are alienated, disengaged, and depressed. However, there is little consensus across theories as to the inter-relationship among these variables. The problem in arriving at a cogent explanation for this phenomenon is that it is very difficult to determine whether a variable is an antecedent, a consequence, or a covariate. For example, one popular theory proposes that social interaction is the critical causal factor. It states that because a woman has been devested of her status of wife, her vehicle for relating to society has been removed. Therefore, disengagement, alienation, and chronic depression ensue (Bowman, 1959; Hiltz, 1981; Lowenthal, 1976; Parkes, 1965; Peretz, 1970). A related theory stresses the importance of maintaining friendship-neighbor ties (Arling, 1978), and family ties (Lopata, 1975; Lowenthal, 1964, 1976). Seligman's theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975; Schneide, 1979), on the other hand, postulates that the uncontrollable event of widowhood leads to depression which in turn leads to disengage-

ment.

All of these theories identify some form of alienation (eg., feelings of aloneness, powerlessness, meaninglessness, valuelessness, hopelessness, and self-abasement), disengagement, and depression as variables associated with widowhood. However, there is disagreement as to how these variables would fit into a causal model of widowhood.

What is needed to arrive at a more cogent model is, not more theory, but to pare down the number of theories. One approach to this task is to find natural laboratories in which these theories may be tested. For example, the social interactionist's position that disengagement leads to chronic depression and alienation would be disconfirmed if we were to find a place where widowhood did not lead to disengagement, but did lead to depression and alienation. This would suggest that although disengagement may often be a concomitant of alienation and depression in widows, it is not the cause. The present study tests the social interactionist's position in such a natural

laboratory.

METHOD

Design: The proportion of widows in elderly populations increases with age (Butler & Lewis, 1975). It is possible that observed differences between widows and marrieds are attributable to age effects. Thus a treatment by blocks design (Myers, 1979) was used to control for possible correlations between the dependent variables. This procedure removes age from the error term and maximizes the probability of finding a difference between widows and marrieds, if one exists. In addition, the interaction with age (does the difference between widows and marrieds decrease with age ?) was of interest, while the main effect of age was of little interest. Age was dichotomized in accordance with Neugaten's (1974) concern that there are significant differences in the level of social activity between the young-old (55-74) and the old-old (>75).

Subjects: An exhaustive survey of all widowed

(N=37) and married (N=24) women living in Leavenworth (pop. 300) was conducted. Subjects were divided into four groups: 16 young-old widows (51-74 years, X=65.94, sd=6.08), 15 young-old marrieds (51-74 years, X=62.25, sd= 6.58), 21 old-old widows (75-93 years, X=79.33, sd=3.04), and 9 old-old marrieds (75-87 years, X=79.33, sd=3.04). None of the widows were remarried.

Leavenworth was selected as a natural laboratory because of its homogeneity. Most of the subjects had lived in the area for their entire life (X=65.9 years, sd=8). They had attended the same school and reached similar educational levels. Currently most were involved in the community's church and senior center. All subjects lived in single family dwellings, with every widow living alone and all married subjects residing with their husbands. The average length of widowhood was 4.5 years for the young-old, and 12.5 for the old-old.

Instruments: All subjects were individually

tested in their homes. For the purpose of measuring depression, Zung's (1965) Self-Rating Depression Scale was employed. Alienation was measured through Jackson's (1968) DJ Scale. Although interviews, demographic data, and observation suggested that the level of social activity was very homogenous within this sample, a manipulation check for social interaction was taken. A behavioral checklist indicating frequency and the nature of social contacts was developed.

Zung's SDS has been used extensively with older populations (eg., Blumenthal, 1975; Guy, 1976; Heidell & Kidd, 1975; Salzman & Shader, 1975; Zung, 1965, 1967, 1970). The SDS reports reliabilites of .80 (Morris, et. al., 1975). Although its validity for older populations has not been established, information is available for samples that include large percentages of elderly people. In these samples the SDS not only correlates significantly with the MMPI D Scale , r=.65, but is more accurate than the D scale at differentiating depressives from other diagnostic categories (Zung, 1965, 1967).

The DJ Scale measures objective alienation through agreement-disagreement responses to 73 neagtively stated items that each correspond to one of six sub-scales of alienation, i.e., aloneness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-abasement, and valuelessness. The DJ Scale reports inter-rater reliabilites of .75.

The social-interaction checklist was used by each subject to record frequency of phone-calls, visitors, and the number of times they left home over a one week period. Subjects also indicated the nature or purpose of the interaction, marking the relationship between themselves and the person with whom they were in contact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of variance was performed for the effects of marital status and age on the six alienation sub-scales, on depression, and the three major social-interaction categories, i.e., phone-calls, visitors, and times left home. The results indicate that marital status

has a significant effect on alienation and depression. Widows of both age groups were higher on aloneness, $F(1,57)=21.973$, $p<.001$, powerlessness, $F(1,57)=13.745$, $p<.001$, meaninglessness, $F(1,57)=20.514$, $p>.001$, valuelessness, $F(1,57)=23.029$, $p<.001$, hopelessness, $F(1,57)=37.530$, $p<.001$, self-abasement, $F(1,57)=11.153$, $p=.001$, and depression, $F(1,57)=44.082$, $p<.001$. However, marital status did not demonstrate a significant effect on any of the social interaction categories, i.e., phone calls, $F(1,57)=1.058$, visitors, $F(1,57)=.026$, times left home, $F(1,57)=.669$. There were no other significant effects or interactions.

The present study finds that widowhood correlates with alienation and depression, but not with disengagement. Since a causal relationship implies correlation, this is a clear disconfirmation of the theory that disengagement is antecedent to alienation and chronic depression. The second major conclusion of this paper is the value of differentiating between actual and perceived isolation. The results

clearly indicate that there is not a total correspondence between the two. For example, an investigator examining just the alienation scale scores reported in this study might assume that role loss leads to depression, while a researcher examining only the amount of contact would not think of role loss as a cause of alienation and depression. Thus, further research into the subjective and objective elements of disengagement may help us to arrive at a more cogent model of widowhood.

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TABLE 1

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

	MARITAL STATUS	AGE	AGE X MARITAL STATUS
	F	F	F
ALONENESS	21.973***	1.205	.003
POWERLESSNESS	13.745***	.003	.566
MEANINGLESSNESS	20.514***	.029	1.786
VALUELESSNESS	23.029***	.124	1.993
HOPELESSNESS	37.530***	.216	.373
SELF-ABASEMENT	11.153***	.126	.001
DEPRESSION	44.082***	1.369	2.160

***.001

TABLE 2

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

	MARITAL STATUS	AGE	AGE X MARITAL STATUS
	F	F	F
PHONE CALLS	1.058	.579	.202
VISITORS	.026	.342	.703
TIMES LEFT HOME	.699	.682	1.569

TABLE 3

MEAN NUMBER OF SOCIAL CONTACTS, PHONE CALLS, TIMES LEFT HOME, AND VISITORS OVER ONE WEEK

	Married < 75	Widowed < 75	Married ≥ 75	Widowed ≥ 75	Married all	Widowed all
PHONE CALLS						
Made	8.46	8.18	8.86	8.71	8.60	8.48
Received	7.77	7.58	7.14	7.54	7.55	7.56
Person in contact with						
Friend	8.23	8.00	7.29	7.96	7.90	7.95
Family	4.69	4.66	4.42	4.67	4.60	4.66
Business	3.31	2.76	3.86	3.21	3.50	3.02
Stranger	0.38	0.24	0.14	0.29	0.30	0.27
Other	0.08	0.18	0.00	0.17	0.05	0.17
TIMES LEFT HOME (Destination)						
Senior Center Visiting	4.38	4.58	4.57	4.60	4.48	4.59
	3.31	3.67	3.28	3.29	3.30	3.48
Church	2.00	1.83	1.86	1.75	1.93	1.79
Shopping	2.46	2.50	2.43	2.29	2.45	2.40
Other	0.69	1.00	0.71	0.79	0.70	0.90
VISITORS (relationship to Subject)						
Friend	3.62	3.58	3.28	3.62	3.45	3.60
Family	2.69	3.10	3.00	2.96	2.84	3.03
Stranger	1.15	1.00	0.71	0.79	0.93	0.90
Other	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.17	0.14	0.12